



BAND-E AMĪR (AFGHANISTAN)

BAND-E AMĪR, the chain of natural lakes 90 km west of Bāmīān in Afghanistan (30°12' north latitude and 66° 30' east longitude).

Physiography. The lakes lie in beds of Cretaceous clay and limestone at 2,900 m altitude on the course of small rivers coming from the east (the headwaters of the *Balkāb*). After flowing through gorges, the rivers are dammed at several points by natural barriers of travertine. The lakes cover a total area of 5,985 km². From east to west there are eight main lacustrine units with widely different degrees of sedimentation, ranging from a dry lake bed (no. 7) and some very shallow pools (nos. 1, 2, 3, 5) to large lakes tens of meters deep (nos. 4, 6, 8; lake no. 4 has an area of 4,875 km² and a depth of 28 m). The natural dams occur at sharp drops in the streambeds, travertine being deposited where the water flow ceases to be calm and becomes turbulent. Vegetal organisms (cyanophytes, chlorophytes, mosses, algae, etc.) play an essential role in the precipitation of the dissolved calcium compounds. No traces of hydro-thermal activity have been found. The Band-e Amīr travertine fits the definition “continental lacustrine deposit of several compounds precipitated by biological activity of vegetal organisms rather than by purely chemical processes” (Lang and Lucas, 1970). Formation of the travertine deposits took place in interglacial phases (the evidence pointing to two glacial Quaternary phases) and continues in the present post-glacial phase. During these phases the water outlets have cut steep-walled channels through the dams.

The lakes in popular imagination and daily life. The spectacular aspect of the natural dams has prompted belief in their miraculous origin. They are said to



have been built by the Prophet's son-in-law 'Alī. The names of the successive dams and the lakes which they impound are Band-e Du'l-feqār (dam of 'Alī's sword), Band-e Pūdena (of the mint plants), Band-e Panīr (of the cheese), Band-e Kaybat (of the magic), Band-e Qanbar (of Qanbar, 'Alī's groom), Band-e Gōlāmān (of the slaves). All relate to episodes of a legend which has come down in two closely similar versions (one outlined by Leech apud Burnes, the other by Foucher and again by Hackin and Kohzad). It seems likely (as suggested by Bernard) that 'Alī's exploits have a wider geographical reference and are to be interpreted as an etiological legend about use of rivers from the Hindu Kush for irrigation. A small sanctuary (*zīārat*) in honor of 'Alī was built at a quite recent date (in 1332/1914 according to Hackin and Kohzad, in 1324/1906 according to Caspani and Cagnacci). The Hazāra people of the district catch fish in the lakes and use the cascades to turn water mills. After the construction of a motor track from Bāmīān and a small hotel, the extraordinary scenery of these turquoise-hued lakes in their setting of almost white-colored bare mountains began to attract tourists.

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